

What's the Point?
On Comparing Joyce and Pynchon¹

Brook Thomas

"What better place than Zürich to find
vanity again?" (GR, 267)

Those of you who came to the session by defying gravity with the elevator might have noticed that it was made in Schlieren. Schlieren, for those not familiar with Zürich, is a suburb in the direction of Basel, right across the Limmat from Unterengstringen. To get there, just take the #13 tram and then the #44 bus.

Readers of Gravity's Rainbow might remember Schlieren because it is the town in which Slothrop gets off the train coming back to Zürich from Geneva, "just in case They're watching the Bahnhof in town" (GR, 267). The problem is that, unless he risks jumping off a fast moving train, Slothrop couldn't have done it. No train coming from Geneva would stop in Schlieren. To get off in Schlieren Slothrop would have to have gotten off in Baden and taken a local.

Why, you might ask, start a talk comparing Joyce and Pynchon with such a detail of local color? I do, because one of the reasons I have learned to pay attention to local details in novels is that I was trained to read a book like Gravity's Rainbow by reading Ulysses. Joyce makes us expect accuracy in even these minor points. We don't always find it in Pynchon. This is not necessarily to fault Pynchon. One of his strengths comes in challenging some of the reading conventions we have learned, including some learned from Joyce. But what my point does do is bring me to a more important point. The point of my point and the reason I requested to speak first (I also promised to be brief and pointed) was to raise the question: What are we doing when we compare Pynchon and Joyce? More often than not, I think we use the comparison to try to make a point. My point is that this is a very dangerous activity when dis-

cussing two writers who, if they share anything, share a distrust about pointed thinking. So, if I may, let me play Mr. Pointsman and make a point about what we should not do in comparing Pynchon and Joyce.

I made my original point because I came to Gravity's Rainbow by way of Ulysses. There is a certain logic to this since Pynchon did too. He read Joyce. To the best of my knowledge, Joyce did not read Pynchon. Even so, it would be unfair to Gravity's Rainbow to insist that it duplicate the scrupulous attention to local detail that we find in Ulysses. Similarly, it can be dangerous to demand of Ulysses certain strengths of Gravity's Rainbow. What we can get, what we have already gotten, when a critic uses a comparison with the purpose of scoring points for one writer at the expense of the other, is a distortion and misreading of both texts.

For an example let me point to Edward Mendelson's "Introduction" in his Prentice-Hall collection of Twentieth Century Views of Pynchon.² Mendelson has a point to make. Gravity's Rainbow transcends the pitfalls of a "hermetic self-referentiality that has already brought literary Modernism to its un mourned dead end" (15). Certain of that truth, he seeks out Ulysses as the example of the Modernist work at its worst and shows how far Gravity's Rainbow has escaped the pull of Ulysses' circularity. This is Mendelson on Ulysses: "The inward turn of Ulysses, the circularity of its narrative, is among the late consequences of the romantic and modernist sensibility whose triumphant achievement is a literature which exists finally only for itself" (11). Thus, "Serene in its vision of unalterable cycles, Ulysses ends just before its beginnings, and closes with its tail in its mouth" (14). Gravity's Rainbow, on the other hand, "devotes its final hundred pages not to a return on itself, but to an effort at finding ultimate beginnings and endings" (14).

Mendelson is far too close a reader of Gravity's Rainbow not to know what Michael Seidel remarks upon later in Mendelson's own collection: "in the doomed theater at the end of the book Pynchon returns, symbolically, to where he began" (196). As Seidel writes,

"When the rocket falls, the book ends with its own destructive tail in its mouth; it uses up all available energy" (197). One can see what Mendelson is trying to do. The circularity in Pynchon self-destructs, leaving the reader face to face with a world outside of the book; in Joyce we have the invitation to follow the book's circularity and stay within the world of the book.

But is it so simple? Joyce does not offer perfect returns. Even in Finnegans Wake the movement from the last page to the first is not continuous. Point of view has changed. In Ulysses Bloom does not have the harmonious return that Odysseus had with Penelope. His crisis is not apocalyptic, but it is one he must face. As we learn in Gravity's Rainbow, however, subtleties are not to be wasted on Mr. Pointsman.

Mendelson expands his argument. "When [Joyce] described his ideal reader--an insomniac who does nothing but read Joyce [that's an important distortion]--he acknowledged that his book focuses on its own structure, and that an understanding of the world outside Ulysses is of little use in understanding the world within it. No other major work of art is at the same time so extreme in its factuality and yet so tenuous [sic] in its relation to its historical setting" (11).

The tenuousness of Ulysses in relation to its historical setting is one of Mendelson's major points. It has to be if he is to show that Modernist literature exists only for itself. But some of the best recent criticism on Joyce--Hugh Kenner's talk earlier this week is an example--has shown that few books demand more than Ulysses demands that a reader have an understanding of the world outside in order to understand the world inside. And I don't have to refer to very sophisticated criticism to make my point. Mendelson again: "The characters in Gravity's Rainbow are among the very few fictional characters whose thoughts and actions are affected by the work they do. In the world outside fiction, anyone can recognize that there is a connection between one's work and one's idea of the world, but Modernism never found--and necessarily could never have found--a way of making use of this

recognition" (5). Anyone who has read Ulysses and does not see the connection between Bloom's work and Bloom's idea of the world has not read Ulysses very deeply.

"The deeper one goes into Ulysses, the sillier it becomes. Joyce knew this, and his own ambivalence towards his book was among the consequences of that knowledge" (11). Yet when Pynchon displays a similar ambivalence towards his book, it is to affirm his "responsible attention to the world outside his books" (3). "Pynchon's comedy, his jokes at the expense of his own verbal contraptions, his violations of literary decorum, his low puns and choral celebrations, are ironic signals of his seriousness of purpose. He is always pointing towards the real conditions of a world more serious than the world in his imagination: pointing towards, not embodying, not displacing" (4). If there is a difference between the effect of Joyce's jokes at the expense of his own verbal contraptions and Pynchon's, it must be demonstrated, not dogmatically asserted. For instance, a panelist today will argue that such self-consciously reflexive remarks found throughout the works of Joyce and Pynchon serve a similar, not different function.

Some of the ideological problems Mendelson has with Joyce may exist. Seeing a pointsman as he rides to the funeral in "Hades," Bloom thinks: "Couldn't they invent something automatic so that the wheel itself much handier? Well but then another fellow would get a job making the new invention" (U, 91). This sense of circularity (we should not forget that it is Bloom's, not necessarily Joyce's) does seem in direct contrast to Pynchon's vision of "the faceless pointsman" (Lot 49, 76) who had thrown history onto the wrong track. In Pynchon we do get a sense of alternative possibilities for history, something akin to the sense of history Walter Benjamin feels so necessary if human beings are to act to influence their destiny: it happened this way, yet with human effort it could have happened another. But even in Pynchon the answer is not clear cut. Pynchon's world is not all ones and zeroes. His pointsman in the passage cited is "faceless." The force of gravity is a natural force defying man's attempts to transcend it. Human beings

may not have the control Mendelson so confidently asserts they have.

The issue Mendelson raises is important, but his desire to make points distracts us from any serious discussion of it. Pynchon does not need critics to perform the service of misreading his "father" poets to make him look good. He can stand on his own, although so long as we use his works to make unsubstantiated points, there will be just as strong a tendency to misread his works as there has been to misread Joyce's.

One final example. Mendelson's own interpretation of The Crying of Lot 49 is improved if it can be demonstrated that Lot 49 occupies "an apocryphal, intertestamentary position" in Pynchon's works. So in his collection, Mendelson goes out of his way to add an editor's note to another writer's essay announcing: "There is another sense in which Lot 49 is 'apocryphal' in Pynchon's work, and that is Pynchon's otherwise incomprehensible refusal to incorporate characters from Lot 49 into Gravity's Rainbow" (160). One wonders how closely he has read Lot 49 or even the essays he includes in his book, since Richard Poirier in his review of Gravity's Rainbow points out nine pages later, "Old Bloody Chiclitz is back, by the way, from V. and The Crying of Lot 49" (169).

A skill Joyce taught his readers was to read the text at hand with care. Pynchon learned his lesson so well that he taught us new ways to read. I hope Pynchon critics don't forget the prior lesson. But as my time is over, I will end. I think my point has been made.

University of Hawaii

- Notes

¹ This is the slightly revised version of a paper read at the Seventh International James Joyce Symposium, held in Zürich, Switzerland, in June of 1979.

² Page references are to Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978).